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ABSTRACT

This document describes the struggles of a diverse group of 37 community leaders, called the Greensboro One Task Force, with the issues of race, class, and government in order to develop a bond package that could be supported by the majority of the voters of a North Carolina city. Through quotes from the participants, the document illustrates how consensus was achieved in this 1985 contest. A concluding chapter outlines three things that the two nonvoting group facilitators considered important about their role: (1) setting boundaries and structures; (2) staying neutral themselves; and (3) having complementary styles. (CML)

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Forging Consensus: Building a Dialogue Among Diverse Leaders

Bernie Ghiselin
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PUTTING IDEAS INTO ACTION

A Center for Creative Leadership Special Report

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Foreword

In late 1984 a diverse group of community leaders in Greensboro, North Carolina, was given the task of developing a bond package that a majority of the city's voters would support. Over the next few months the Greensboro One Task Force struggled with heated issues of race, class, and government and then came to agreement. It was assisted in its consensus-forging effort by the Center for Creative Leadership. The following report, by Bernie Ghiselin of the Center staff, tells the story of how it was done. Supplementing the report is an afterword by Russ Moxley, one of the two facilitators that the Center contributed to the effort.

I asked that this record of Greensboro One be made not only because it was a notable success, but also because it is an interesting case of what I call a *leadership intergroup*. The Center conducts a great deal of research and training concerned with the effectiveness of managers and managerial teams within organizations. By comparison it is unusual for a collection of leaders from different organizations to receive the same sort of professional attention.

The importance of leadership intergroups today is undeniable. Even though the management field at present is primarily concerned with the problem of leadership within organizations, much of the action takes place at the interfaces between organizations. Witness the talk, for example, about building closer ties between organizations and their suppliers and customers. This need for cooperation among leaders from different organizations applies as much to the public sector as the private. Frequently, problems in business, government, or society cross domains. The "messes" that Russell Ackoff wrote about in *Redesigning the Future* are inter-institutional challenges that can only be met through cooperation among the constituent parties, which comes down to having the representatives of those parties work together effectively.

This is not easy. Each party is alive to its own interests, and the interests of several parties often compete, sometimes anonymously. It is hard enough when only two are involved. But the situation considered here, where multiple parties must participate in finding a solution at least minimally satisfactory to all, could be overwhelming.

This is not the place to describe a technology for gaining the cooperation of multiple parties in problem solving. Suffice it to say that the process, with or without professional help, involves several steps as described by Barbara Gray in *Collaborating: Finding Common Ground for Multiparty Problems*. First, the leadership intergroup must be assembled. The right organizations—those with a stake in the outcome—must be chosen, as the right leaders to represent each of those stakeholders must be chosen. Second, once assembled, the group must work out a shared view of the problem, which requires the members of the group to truly understand one another. Third, it must discover and negotiate a viable solution—one that is both workable and acceptable. Finally, it must put the solution into practice or hand it over to others who will. This is a long way from the ordinary step-by-step problem-solving exercise because the leadership intergroup's "underboundedness" must be overcome; out of all the separate entities that come together initially, a group with its own superordinate purpose must form.

The work of such groups is critical in our more and more interdependent world, and it will become increasingly so. That's why we at the Center are pleased to have had the opportunity to help the city by facilitating the work of Greensboro One, and why we will continue our efforts to make such groups work.

Robert Kaplan
Director
Executive Leadership Applications Group
Center for Creative Leadership

Forging Consensus:
Building a Dialogue Among Diverse Leaders

A Twilight Meeting

At dusk one evening in March 1985, ten key members of a Greensboro, North Carolina, task force disbanded after a meeting in near silence, at sharp odds over the final details of a $40 million bond package for voters.

"It got so heated, we said we might as well end it here," said one of the group, a university official.

After five months of meetings, debates, reports, arguments, and agreement on most of the bond proposals, the task force still disagreed over the single most complex and emotional issue it faced: housing.

"I left that meeting wondering if we were ever going to accomplish anything," said another member, a retired merchant.

The stakes were enormous.

The ability of Greensboro to attract business, industry, and people, to build for the future, depended heavily on this task force. Unless it could speak in a voice of clear unanimity, dispelling any question of disagreement, its recommendations would be ignored.

Had nothing more happened that evening, had everyone parted in silence, at least one black member would have gone public, exposing the group's conflicts. He would have argued that, once again, minorities were being short-changed by a government dominated by whites, by business and by industry; "the heavy hitters," he called them.

The public discord could have destroyed the work of this group. Without the support of the NAACP and the black community, a bond issue probably would have failed.

It would not be the first time.

The Greensboro One Task Force was created during a period of stagnation in community leadership. Energies that might have been devoted to economic and cultural enhancement were being absorbed by fundamental problems of governance. The city council was divided. Mistrust and suspicion were watchwords of the day.

In large part the surface images disguised these problems. In 1981 Greensboro had won high praise. Its economic balance, its highway and road system, its clean environment, its schools and

recreational amenities led Rand McNally to give the Greensboro area the No. 3 ranking out of 277 large metropolitan areas in its *Places Rated Almanac*. Even in rush hour to drive from one side of town to another took only 15 minutes. It was a good place to raise children.

Moreover, Greensboro is the home of a proud black university (North Carolina A&T State University) that has produced such graduates as astronaut Ron McNair, killed in the 1986 Challenger disaster, and the Rev. Jesse Jackson, candidate for the 1988 Democratic Party presidential nomination.

Yet the specter of racial conflict haunted Greensboro and its government. Memories would not die. The city was yet famous for the 1960 Woolworth lunch counter sit-ins; it was depicted by many as a city one-third black governed by a tight minority of conservative whites. "For too long, we've had a city that was governed by a narrow few," said more than one member of the task force.

If anything, racial differences were symbolic of imbalances in overall community leadership; the dissension which led Greensboro into a period of stagnation was more than simply racial. It stemmed from sectional and class issues as well, haves versus have-nots, from differences in vision and expectations. "This community has never determined what it is and who it wants to be," said Mayor John Forbis in the fall of 1984.

In this atmosphere of mistrust and misdirection, the mayor and the city council were in conflict among themselves and lacked the influence and the authority to win voter support for large-scale capital projects. Whether at the polls or on the streets, its proposals were being rejected.

During the previous ten years the traditional manufacturing base of the city's economy, mainly textiles, had declined. Meanwhile, many of the "high tech" employers coming to North Carolina bypassed Greensboro in favor of Charlotte, Winston-Salem, the Research Triangle (as the region comprised by Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill is called), and other areas. Speaking to a Protestant ministers' group in April 1984, Mayor Forbis conceded that Greensboro had not seen appreciable economic growth since 1978.

Summarizing this period, a 1987 mayoral candidate said:

> As we moved into the middle 1980s something started to go wrong. We seemed to be on a flat spot. . . . Things were out of sync. Some citizens felt alienated from City Hall. And many

expressed frustration at what they perceived to be reactive rather than proactive government.

By the fall of 1984 a comprehensive bond referendum was overdue. Greensboro was beginning to lack important amenities and services needed to attract industry. Many felt there was a need to expand the Greensboro Coliseum, enlarged in 1970 but losing its competitive edge. Others argued for parks and recreation improvements, an arts center, an expanded natural history museum, a downtown convention center, street improvements, a municipal golf course.

In October, Mayor Forbis took a challenging approach. He called together an independent task force of leaders from a broad cross section of the community. With the support of the city council he gave this task force autonomy, the right to decide the bond projects as well as the dollar amounts. Once the task force was formed the city government would step out of the picture. The name "Greensboro One Task Force" symbolized the aspiration for top ranking among cities of its size.

Realizing the task force would not be free of dissension, Mayor Forbis asked the Center for Creative Leadership to provide facilitators who would remain neutral to the issues. This team would process the discussions, manage meetings, keep records, and assist in communications.

Within scant weeks this task force of 37 people took on an independence beyond anyone's expectations, grappling with so many difficult issues that its work was delayed far beyond the original deadline. In many respects the issues were the same that had created within Greensboro a spirit of dissension and the threat of economic stagnation. These conflicts were between the large brick-and-mortar capital projects desired by the business community and human services proposals desired by minority groups.

One side was addressing cultural and economic advancement: convention centers, arts centers, coliseums, things with regional appeal. The other group was addressing fundamental human needs: good plumbing, safe housing, finding a bus to visit someone in a hospital on a Sunday afternoon. In between were those on the task force who sympathized with both.

After five months of work the question of municipal support for public housing remained the single most difficult issue to resolve. The issue of public housing was dear to those on the task

force who spoke for minority and black citizens. An early attempt to kill the housing issue had been defeated.

The outcome of Greensboro One hinged on a single compromise reached that evening in March 1985. It began when two men, a young black and a middle-aged white, spoke alone in the parking lot after the others had left. Each man changed his position on the housing issue and parted in essential agreement. Within weeks of their brief talk the task force handed Mayor Forbis a unanimous recommendation for a $39.9 million bond issue of 18 projects. Voters approved all but one of the projects in the November 1985 election.

However, the success of Greensboro One involves much more than a single twilight meeting in a parking lot by two people. Hard work over six months by all 37 members of the task force, as well as that of two facilitators and a secretary from the Center for Creative Leadership, all contributed to the outcome. This work created an environment, an atmosphere that permitted the possibility of compromise on the most heated issues of race, class, and government.

The parking lot talk that led to the final compromise could not have occurred five months earlier. It could have happened only after the full task force had worked through a slow process of testing, building trust, sharing conflict, and making endless smaller compromises along the way.

How, then, did Greensboro One create this environment, turning long-standing dissension into consensus and notable progress in community leadership? And what were the lessons?

The Opening Bell

On November 14, 1984, after a dinner of prime rib, the Greensboro One Task Force assembled in the auditorium of the Center for Creative Leadership, located in a wooded area of Guilford County, removed from the daily bustle of government and politics.

The three dozen people who assembled for that first meeting could not have been more diverse. The method of selection was designed to assure a representative group. Of the 37 members, 18 were chosen by city council members (two by each member), while 19 came from various community organizations.

Among others, the task force included a retired grocer, a minister, a psychologist, an insurance executive, a mail clerk, a college president, two professors, three bankers, two lawyers, an engineer, a tax consultant. The organizations represented included the Rotary and Kiwanis clubs, the Junior League, the Chamber of Commerce, and various neighborhood groups.

Most areas of the city were represented. More than a quarter of the task force was black; ten were women. Every member had been active in community affairs. Whether in schools and education, in parks and recreation, in community or economic development, most had a record of community service.

Except for only one member of "blue collar" credentials, the Greensboro One Task Force might have walked straight from a clinic on community development. Its membership consisted of:

- people with advanced educations who represented a variety of occupations;
- individuals who represented the variety of socioeconomic and ethnic groups in Greensboro;
- those with historic family roots in the community as well as long-time residents born elsewhere;
- newcomers to Greensboro; and
- individuals who had been involved in local government in either an elected or appointed capacity.

While this caliber of representation was laudable, the Center for Creative Leadership was, frankly, worried. When first requested to facilitate the group, the Center declined and suggested outside consultants. Given the city's background of dissension the Center was skeptical that 37 people could accomplish their task in only a few months. How manageable would they be? Besides, the professionals at the Center who were qualified for this work were already burdened by heavy training loads. Where would they find the time?

However, Mayor Forbis and the city council begged the Center to reconsider, to become more active in community matters. "We said, 'If you guys are going to talk about leadership, show us yours,'" said a former councilman.

In the last analysis the Center could not avoid several realities. By late 1984 the Center was embarked on a mature phase of growth. Stronger participation in community matters was

appropriate if not overdue. Also, the Center enjoyed in Greensboro a reputation of neutrality. It would thus begin the game as a trusted force. A long process of establishing interpersonal and professional credibility would be unnecessary.

Bonnie McAlister and Russ Moxley, senior trainers who had worked with many groups, both public and corporate, agreed to work with the task force. A Greensboro resident for 20 years, McAlister handled the Center's communications programs. In recent months, she had facilitated a community drug-abuse task force.

Moxley had been a Greensboro resident less than four months. He came to the Center from ARCO Alaska where he was the manager of training and development. His background included 15 years of experience in management training and organization development. At the time he was assistant director of the Looking Glass behavioral simulation and a senior trainer for the Center.

However experienced they were in other settings, both were unsure of this assignment. Neither had worked with community groups this large that had no clear goals at the outset.

"First of all, it was a group of diverse leaders, which meant they were strong, powerful, and used to being in leadership positions," said Moxley. "Usually in a large group there are chiefs and there are Indians. Well, in this case there weren't any Indians."

"And there was no agreed agenda by that group," said McAlister. "I don't think they went into it having a sense of what they were going to accomplish as a group. I think that had to be defined. Presumably, there were 37 individual agendas at the start. There wasn't any real sense as to what exactly they were supposed to do."

"Or how they were supposed to do it," said Moxley. "They had no clear sense of the how at all. And that's where Bonnie and I came in and helped them with the 'how.'"

"And with the 'what,'" McAlister added.

The members of the task force who settled into the red-cushioned seats that evening were no less apprehensive. Mixed in political sophistication, the group included a former mayor and an NAACP leader, along with several who had never involved themselves in government beyond the neighborhood or organizational level.

From the politically savvy came frank skepticism. "The first time I went I said to myself, 'you're wasting your time,'" said the NAACP leader. One staunch Republican, active in precinct politics for years, at first declined to serve. "I didn't expect anything to come out of it," he said. "It was too big of a group." He attended only because he was implored by constituents to guard their interests.

From others not close to politics came honest confusion. "Other than just reading the paper," said a college professor, she was not at all informed on Greensboro politics. When she joined the task force, she added, "I didn't know anybody. It was a whole new experience for me."

"I don't think we really understood the magnitude of the task," said a marketing executive. "We were just a large group, with a large mandate, hearing a lot of information." Said another: "I really didn't understand what was going on until the third meeting."

"I think there was mistrust and unease from various subgroups," said one woman who sensed the presence of many old grudges and hidden agendas. "I wasn't privy to any hidden agendas and that's why I was uncomfortable."

Amidst this skepticism and confusion, Mayor Forbis described the mandate for the task force in broader terms than he had a month earlier. In his original summons the task force was to select proposals mainly from the city's 1984-94 capital improvement plan for a city-wide referendum.

In his language at this first meeting, though, he challenged the group to "propel this community into the next century" with its recommendations.

"This community has never determined what it is and who it wants to be," he said. "What we're trying to do is afford the people of this community an opportunity to say what kinds of things they want to do."

While no questions were asked, the task force would leave this first meeting conflicted over its mission and goals. "The task force was not sure whether to look long-range or short-term," said Moxley. The resolution of this conflict would lead the task force to an independence that would further challenge its ability to reach compromise.

However, the questions provoked by the mayor had to wait. There was more important work at hand that November evening:

setting the norms, the organizing principles and, most importantly, the leadership that would serve the task force over the next several months. The climate set that first night proved critical.

Bonnie McAlister reiterated the Center's role: She and Moxley would not participate in decision making, setting priorities, or serve as content experts. Nor would the Center act as spokesperson for the task force to the media.

When she finished, Moxley summarized the environment in which the task force was beginning its work. He characterized the task force as a diverse group of leaders often at odds who were seeking to agree on a bond referendum for Greensboro voters. He summarized the mandate from the mayor and mentioned some of the realities. He assured each that they had something to offer and hoped each would make his or her own unique contribution.

"I would have given you tremendous odds it [the task force] would not be unanimous," said one member who had been close to city politics for years.

With these preliminaries behind them, the dinner, the talk by the mayor, the introductions, an understanding of roles, the audience attentive, the ground was prepared. Bonnie McAlister and Russ Moxley then calmly began planting the first seeds from which would blossom the compromises of spring 1985.

The norms and standards described that night were little different from those commonly found in effective groups. They strived to place all members on a level playing field and focused on the issues at hand. They made it possible for members to contribute to one another's knowledge, and it diffused power struggles from the outset.

The ideal, said McAlister, was for members to leave their individual history, their old battles and agendas at the door before meetings began: "excess baggage," she called it. To promote this behavior she asked the members to widen their sense of community beyond their own special needs and interests.

As she spoke the task force asked few questions. Several took notes. In more than one respect, these political and community leaders, many of them adversaries, were back in school, learning to play by different rules.

If any single mood characterized that evening, it was one of restraint as well as skepticism. Here was a room with strong community leaders who held their assertiveness in check. "A lot of people were working very hard to hold back," said one member.

However, the facilitators knew that too much restraint would inhibit the group's work.

McAlister told the group that a potential for danger lay in withholding information and feelings from others. The creative potential of the task force will increase as everyone contributes, she said, both to the task as well as to relationships. Task behaviors, she said, are those that organize, direct, and structure the work of the group. Relationship behaviors are those that increase the level of openness, cooperation, and commitment.

Moxley then applied these principles to the specific needs of the task force. He asked the group to:

- create widespread participation;
- surface differences;
- broaden their perspectives;
- strive to build trust;
- pursue problem solving; and
- push toward consensus.

During subsequent meetings these norms would be reviewed against the operation of the task force.

There was no dissent over these principles. But no sooner did the members agree on rules than they clashed. It was almost as if the night could not pass without at least one important disagreement.

The question arose, should they allow the press to attend their meetings? Some feared the group could not be frank or open in the presence of the media. As they spoke, a newspaper reporter sat on a back row, quietly taking notes. The meeting was at a standstill.

"I think they were having real pangs of conscience at that point," said McAlister. "On the one hand, it would affect people's honesty to have someone from the press. On the other hand, they knew you can't have something like that going on and have it gagged. So I think they were feeling some ambivalence. And we knew it had to be opened to the press."

"We would have been in a very difficult position if they had decided to close it," said Moxley. "In terms of how I felt, it unnerved me a little that it came up."

"They coalesced after that," said McAlister.

"They fielded it nicely," Moxley added. "They did a nice job of talking about it. And they did a nice job of coming to consensus on it."

"Russ is being modest. He managed that." What did Moxley do?

"Well, first he gulped," said McAlister. "He swallowed. It could have hit the fan at that point. Then he went right into process skills. As I recall, he said, 'There seems to be some difference of opinion here. Can we hear from you people how you feel about this issue?'"

"We had just set a norm that we would express our differences," said Moxley. "We had said that we would put our issues on the table. And the group acted out those norms very quickly."

Moxley did not call for a vote on the question until he felt all opinions had surfaced and the group was ready. In a voice vote the "ayes" were clearly more audible than the "nays," and the presence of the media was no longer an issue. But before he went on to other business, Moxley checked with those who dissented. "Can you live with the decision?" he asked. A young lawyer who had spoken most vigorously against the media being present said he could live with the decision.

"It was a good object lesson up front on how we were going to handle it," said McAlister.

"It set a very early norm," Moxley added. "We've learned this working with a lot of companies. It's one thing to write out a values statement and say, 'These are our values.' What's meaningful is when you see it play out in behavior. With the raising of that one issue, we very quickly got a chance to test and see whether or not we were going to live by our norms."

"And also, our credibility went up a lot," said McAlister. "Because all of a sudden we weren't just paying lip service to the way we were going to operate. We were *showing* them how we were going to operate."

"It wouldn't have worked nearly so well to set those norms without having an issue to test them," said Moxley. "It scared me. I did gulp."

"We both were scared to death when that came up."

Finally that night came the most sensitive question: leadership. Should Greensboro One be led by a single chairperson? If so, who? Or should it be led by a steering committee, representative of the group?

Considerable debate on leadership had taken place in the days and weeks prior to the task force coming together. Many feared that

a single chairperson or a steering committee would gain undue influence. Neither could be expected to divorce themselves entirely from their individual constituent interests. As the weeks and months passed, these special interests might prevail.

The scars of old community battles had not healed. As many looked across the room they saw their adversaries, people they had long come to suspect, and they wondered how the game could possibly be played. If any suspected the leadership was favoring one group over another, they would leave.

To complicate matters the divisions in the group were not simply racial. This was, indeed, a heterogeneous group representing different socioeconomic aspirations, different visions of the future. There were more variations than themes.

After much discussion Mayor Forbis, the city council, advisors at the Center, and others agreed: The task force should be led by a rotating advisory committee. There would be four members. Their names would be drawn from a hat, randomly. These four would serve only for two meetings. At that time three members would step aside, ineligible to serve again, and the fourth would remain to assure continuity from one advisory group to another. Then another three names would be drawn from the hat.

The task force adopted this leadership plan with little objection. As one said later, the rotating committee "gave enough diversity that you had tentacles out to the entire group."

"We didn't have to vote for or against anybody," said one woman, the president of a civic organization. "We were all still equal. Nobody had more power than anyone else."

The final business that night was to select those first four members to serve on the advisory committee. A member sitting on the first row drew names at random from a hat. The names were those of two blacks and two whites; one woman and three men. The three males consisted of a prominent minister, an insurance executive, and a teacher. The woman was a college professor.

Although the members left that first meeting uncertain about their mandate, the playing field had been leveled. They survived their first disagreement. They laid to rest the leadership issue and took the first steps toward becoming an independent task force. "It made you feel as though you had made a commitment," said one woman.

But the spirit of November 14, 1984, did not flow by magic from the pines and dogwoods surrounding the Center for Creative

Leadership. Nor did it fall from textbooks on group dynamics. It began with hard lessons two years earlier in another conflict on another field by another group, the Dialogue Task Force.

War and Detente

Like many Southern cities, Greensboro grew up as two separate towns—black and white. For the most part, blacks lived in the south and southeast while whites lived in neighborhoods in the north and northwest.

Since profits lay in building vast subdivisions in the north and northwest where whites wanted to live, the development boom following World War II did little to disturb that racial pattern. And there was certainly plenty of room; at 79 square miles, for example, Greensboro covers a third more land than either Boston (51) or San Francisco (49).

Throughout the 60s and 70s these white areas gained in numbers, prosperity, and political strength relative to the south and southeast precincts. The at-large system of representation, where every voter has a vote on every candidate, gave clear advantage to these precincts which sent voters to the polls in greater numbers.

This white majority was content to allow city government to be led by people aligned closely with the conservative business community. "The whites abdicated leadership to the Chamber of Commerce," said one former councilman. In addition, city government was heavily influenced by the culture of the larger corporations, satisfied with Greensboro as a Southern town innocent of the urban ills of Northern cities. Low growth would mean continued low taxes.

The pressures resulting from this social and political disparity played on tensions always at work in American society: those between pluralism and elitism. By 1980 the most sensitive issue in city politics was the district system versus the at-large system of electing council members. "The record of electing blacks was pretty bad," said one political scientist who has studied Greensboro government.

Since 1968 there had been four referenda and four defeats of the district system, the most recent in May 1980, by a margin of

304 votes. The black community enjoyed no more than token representation in city government.

In the fall of 1981 the paramount goal of the black community was greater representation in city government and a scrapping of the at-large system. The issue became so important that in mid-September the two main black community organizations put aside long-standing differences and joined forces. They planned to endorse six candidates in the forthcoming city council election. In the October 7 primary, voters were to select 12 out of 23 candidates, and two mayoral candidates, to run for city council on November 3.

The black organizations had rarely banded together so successfully. "There was a cohesiveness I had never seen before in the minority community," said one veteran NAACP leader. By October 6 they had mailed their endorsements to 17,000 households and had run an effective campaign. The results were astounding. In the October 7 primary their candidates finished first, second, third, fifth, seventh, and tenth. Women candidates took three of the first four places. Four of the top five were advocates of a strong ward, or district, system. Clearly, the blacks had taken a bold step toward changing the locus of decision on district government.

Among the upper middle-class, white, conservative, pro-business establishment, the shock was almost galvanic. "You're going to see telephone brigades, you're going to see mailings, you're going to see yard signs . . . radio ads," said one observer.

Their reaction was immediate and powerful. Within two weeks, new political groups had formed with names such as "Stand Up for Greensboro Committee" and "Committee to Keep Greensboro Greensboro." One was led by a former mayor.

Old-line establishment activists poured thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours into efforts to elect the candidates not endorsed by the black groups. Battle lines were clearly drawn. On the one side were six candidates endorsed by the black groups who favored a district voting system. On the other were six candidates who were either lukewarm or opposed to district voting.

The new committees portrayed "radical" change if the black-endorsed candidates won the day. At stake, they said, was a major reshuffling of city political leaders. First, the at-large system would give way to a ward system. Next, the council-manager form of government would be threatened. And finally, city councilmen would meddle in city personnel matters to influence hiring.

"These guys genuinely want the city to remain the way they like it," said a city official. "They're not playing little games. They're very serious."

Just how serious became quickly apparent.

By pooling their money and running a joint campaign, the new committees could afford large newspaper ads. Their advertising used the same themes and even the same phrases. Sample rhetoric: "If you love Greensboro, stand up with us." And, "The question is, are you angry enough to act?" Meanwhile, these new groups refused to reveal their budgets, the names of their members, or even their ad agency.

For a few weeks in October 1981 Greensboro politics stepped totally out of character. An accommodation that had lasted throughout the 1970s completely broke down. The time-honored tradition was for candidates to run as individuals. But during this campaign voters would see six candidates appearing on a podium together, giving the clear impression they were running as a slate. It was utterly foreign.

"When slates of candidates band together," said an editorial, "it can obscure individual differences and qualifications among the candidates and promote divisiveness."

That was putting it politely.

One of the ugliest, hardest fought city elections in history was in full throttle. One resident deplored "the downright divisiveness and emotionalism, personal attacks and hard feelings like I've seen in no city campaign for 12 years."

"I just hope, whoever gets elected, the scars aren't so deep they can't sit down and reason together when it's over." Said another editorial: "Some of the rhetoric has gotten downright scary."

On November 3, 1981, voters in the north and northwest precincts swarmed to the polls in near record numbers. When the dust cleared, Greensboro had elected its first all-white city council in 13 years. All of the winning candidates lived in, or within a stone's throw of, the northwest quadrant. Two white candidates endorsed by the blacks were elected, but the only black incumbent on the city council was defeated.

In addition, a proposal that the city adopt a ward system was defeated by a 2-1 margin.

By late fall, race relations in Greensboro had fallen to a level unseen since the civil rights boycotts of the early 1960s. On black

radio stations, "Greensboro was painted once again as a racist Southern town," said one city official.

"Only a fool can look at the racial composition of this new council and tell we are not going to have a tough two years ahead of us," said one of the winning candidates. "Our first priority is to bring this city back together."

Within weeks of the election calm heads began to prevail. The tensions of the campaign had unleashed a venom atypical for Greensboro and community leaders were sobered. The more emotional and inflammatory voices were not representative of the community. If anything, Greensboro's tradition was to accede to change rather than risk destructive confrontation. In the early 1970s, for example, the city chose a stance of accommodation rather than massive resistance when faced with the busing of school children. "We would always do the civil thing," said a black city official. "Greensboro is seldom in total disarray."

"It was a very polarized period in Greensboro history in terms of human relationships," said one city official. "There were a lot of issues to be resolved." Many of the more patient, responsible leaders realized Greensboro's development was dead in its tracks unless something was done.

The healing process began when two leaders in the black community, Charles Fairley, an NAACP leader who was a retired government official, and Roy D. Moore, a university department head, contacted James Melvin, immediate former mayor and chairman of a leading savings and loan association.

They sought to assemble a representative group of people in leadership positions for little more than talk. "The original thing was, 'Let's talk. We're not even talking together,'" said Fairley. If they could communicate, perhaps they could produce an environment for change.

"The original idea was to invite some citizens into our homes for a cocktail party," he added. "But we decided that would be too much of a one-time thing. We wanted something a little bit more lasting."

The three did not have to beg. The leaders they invited willingly agreed to attend the first meeting or two. "We needed to keep this town talking behind the scenes," said a former city councilman. Naming itself the "Dialogue Task Force," this group of 18 people was destined to play a key role in Greensboro's ending its long conflict over the district system of government.

No sooner did they assemble, however, than dissension surfaced. "The language was breathtaking," said one member. "People brought their agendas and put them on the table initially, bam!" said another. After two meetings, the disagreements and mistrust were so great the group was unable to select a chairperson or develop an organizing focus. "As much as we wanted to resolve the problems," said one of its founders, "we didn't have the ability." But they were willing to accept an outside facilitator they perceived as neutral.

At this point the group requested the assistance of the Center for Creative Leadership. Although its facilitators were trained in conflict management, the Dialogue Task Force represented a unique challenge; it was a far more diverse group than the Center had typically assisted. At a meeting on January 12, 1982, the Dialogue Task Force put aside its differences for one night in order to consider some guiding principles of conduct and leadership.

As a facilitator from the Center spoke, the members began to see themselves afresh from the view of a neutral observer. For the first time, many saw themselves as a group. They began to realize an obligation to their constituents, if not their community. They began to see that they were, indeed, the right people in the right place at the right time. And they saw that each had a valuable contribution to make. Complete silence, a holding back of information and feelings, could be as destructive as the most vociferous name-calling.

Following this general statement the facilitators put into operation the same norms and standards that would later govern the conduct of the Greensboro One Task Force in the fall of 1984. In general they sought widespread participation, a surfacing of differences, a broadening of perspective, and a push toward consensus.

While the Dialogue Task Force consisted of a representative group of community leaders, its main division was racial. There was a black and a white side to each issue. Left to itself, given the enormous mistrust in the community, the group could not find impartial leadership. With the involvement of neutral facilitators, however, leadership no longer was an issue. A proposal for a rotating committee was abandoned in favor of a permanent team consisting of two blacks, two whites, and two facilitators from the Center for Creative Leadership. This group met regularly.

But to agree on rules and leadership did not spell instant clarity of mission. Like any diverse group with a complex assign-

ment, the task force struggled. "Naturally, there were a lot of wheels spinning around goals," said one member. "We didn't have any goals."

During these fragile weeks of testing and uncertainty the Dialogue Task Force was held together by two factors. One was an unspoken sense of urgency, alarm, that the community was somehow in trouble. The other was pride. Assembled at the table were those who carried heavy leverage in their own communities or organizations. Being invited to this secret conclave was, in one sense, an honor. One member said he was optimistic from the outset "because of the players involved. We had the movers and the shakers."

Said another member: "I think everyone sensed the energy and the leadership potential. They did not want it to fail."

Throughout March and April of 1982 the Dialogue Task Force addressed many issues. A full-blown if ungenteel dialogue was in progress. "It was heated at times, hostile at times," said a former city official. "But it was also very healthy." The subjects touched virtually every raw nerve of economic stagnation and community dissension: housing, inner-city transportation, job discrimination, downtown renewal, and much else. "We had traded 20 years of low taxes for 20 years of nothingness," said one member.

Slowly, the task force began to communicate, to step beyond angry demands and listen to one another.

"It always amazed me," said one facilitator, recalling this early period. "At 9:30 one night I had had it. Within five minutes of the session's ending, I was in my car. I packed up all my paraphernalia and I was headed home.

"But you would see them in the parking lot beginning to cluster, maybe a cluster here and a cluster there," he said. "There would be blacks and whites together. Talking. Sometimes we'd have meetings afterwards and you'd come out an hour later and they'd be sitting there, talking."

While no issues were resolved, the group was undergoing an important process: simply getting to know and trust one another as individuals. "I developed a sense of —— as a humorous and interesting person," said one member of another he had thoroughly mistrusted. "We were developing an atmosphere where people could honestly express themselves," said another.

If anything, low attendance at meetings was more a threat to cohesiveness than arguments and disagreement.

However much they discussed in these early weeks, however well they were learning to communicate, the Dialogue Task Force avoided its single most emotional issue: a district system of government. There was a certain unspoken understanding that the topic was too big, too dangerous to tackle in the early going. "All along, everyone knew we would get to that issue," said one of the steering committee members. "I experienced a lot of approach-avoidance around that issue," said one of the facilitators.

But every member of the task force knew the clock was ticking.

In August 1981 the city had proposed the third largest annexation in its history and the first in more than ten years. The area included 10.5 square miles and 13,800 people in three areas of Guilford County adjacent to the west and north of Greensboro. The area was 91 percent white.

This annexation was immediately challenged by the NAACP. Under the Voting Rights Act of 1965 hundreds of state and local governments across the South, including Greensboro, could not alter any election procedure without review by the Justice Department. And on June 22, 1982, the U.S. Justice Department rejected the annexation.

The addition of thousands of white voters living in the areas targeted for annexation would dilute the voting power of the city's blacks, said the Justice Department. "Given the existence of racially polarized voting in the city, this could easily eliminate the limited success that blacks have had in past city elections," the letter added.

"We are unable to conclude that the at-large election system recognizes the political potential of black voters in Greensboro as a fairly drawn ward-type plan would do," the letter said.

Already facing a suit in state courts brought by residents in the annexed area, the city now faced yet another adversary. One alternative was to appeal the Justice Department objection. This would be costly, time-consuming, and risky. Another would be to cancel the annexation. But this would hurt municipal pocketbooks and impede municipal growth.

Clearly, the hour had arrived in Greensboro, as it had arrived in many other American communities, for a ward, or district, voting system. "It was a watershed time," said one task force member. "If we did not solve this dilemma, we as a city would be paralyzed." Without going public, Mayor Forbis and the city council

yielded to the Dialogue Task Force, now six months old and ready for its greatest challenge.

In mid-July the task force had put aside every other issue from the table, even housing, and immersed itself in the minutiae of representation. There were articles from scholarly journals on socioeconomic factors of district elections. There were pages of statistics on population trends, precinct counts, and voter registration. There were maps carving Greensboro into this district and that.

Throughout these summer weeks the task force was never in disagreement over whether a district system should be adopted. The U.S. Justice Department had settled that question. Its challenge was to choose one district system and decide whether that system should be adopted by city council ordinance or by voter referendum.

Above all, the task force aimed for a unanimous recommendation. To go public with a split vote would only undermine the influence and credibility of a group that was sanctioned by city hall but was not operating publicly.

The blacks opposed a referendum; five defeats at the polls were enough. They advocated a 6-2-1 system (6 council members elected by district, two elected at large, and a mayor elected at large) that would include three districts with black majorities.

Whites favored a 5-3-1 system that included two districts with black majorities, the election of three councilmen at large, and a voter referendum. Four different plans were debated.

However difficult the issue, the Dialogue Task Force of late summer 1982 held clear advantages over the group that edged to the table on January 12. The language was temperate, the goal was clear, and an atmosphere of greater trust prevailed. Moreover, the members could now see that the stakes were much higher than they originally suspected.

Failure to agree would lead to a battle in U.S. Supreme Court over annexation. Failure would reinforce the image of Greensboro as an elitist community run by a powerful few. Failure would send the message to three-fourths of the city that the northwest quadrant was in charge. And failure to adopt a district system would allow elected and appointed city officials to solidify their power bases.

"The stakes were really high," said one member of the steering committee. "In looking back, higher than we knew. We had to bring something out. We had to deliver."

In the early days of September the Dialogue Task Force faced the compromise that would spell its fate. If each side did not yield, the long months of work would come to naught. That compromise came during a meeting one evening at North Carolina A&T State University. The whites gave up on a referendum; the blacks accepted more at-large voting than they desired.

On September 29, 1982, the task force recommended that the city council adopt a 5-3-1 district system by ordinance. There would be nine council members; five elected from districts, three council members and the mayor elected at large. Within days the Dialogue Task Force and its recommendation were made public.

Born in racial and political conflict, the Dialogue Task Force had risen from acrimony and anger to historic compromise. It emerged from the hot flame of debate to offer Greensboro an escape from its impending political disaster.

With the help of the Center for Creative Leadership the 18 members slowly learned to share knowledge, to argue without abandoning the dialogue. "We know we can disagree violently and still convince each other the other is wrong," said one member.

Building consensus before reaching decisions, the group tackled simple issues first, then difficult issues as trust developed. "Out of that have come some real bonds that I think have flowed into other things," said one member, a veteran of Greensboro politics.

On December 16, 1982, the Greensboro City Council, avoiding another voter referendum, unanimously approved the 5-3-1 district system of representation recommended by the Dialogue Task Force. "Everyone cringed in fear of the reaction," said one member. "But almost nothing happened. It was almost a non-event."

In January 1983, one year after the task force first assembled, the city attorney notified the U.S. Justice Department that Greensboro was in compliance with the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The annexation proceeded without further obstacles. In November 1983, two blacks were elected to the city council under the new district system.

And a precedent was set for both dialogue and action, a method for surmounting conflict, that would be summoned again in November 1984.

Permission to Dream

At 7:30 a.m. on November 16, 1984, the Greensboro One advisory committee held its first meeting at Tex & Shirley's, a restaurant popular for its breakfasts. Energized by the events two evenings previous, the group settled numerous housekeeping and procedural matters. It was a good meeting.

But as they talked, drank coffee, and munched on pancakes, the members realized something was amiss. "We did not understand the mandate as thoroughly as we felt we should," reported the minutes of that meeting.

There was good reason for confusion, for the task force had received mixed messages. In his original summons, Mayor Forbis gave limited options. He asked the task force to select projects from the city's 1984-94 capital improvement plan "and other recent proposals." He further implored the task force to make its recommendations in time for a spring 1985 referendum.

The last thing city hall wanted was a bond referendum mingled with issues of the November 1985 general election. The city's history had proven that bond referenda were the hothouse plants of government and required delicate cultivation. Rule one: Don't mix a bond referendum with a city council election or, if possible, anything else. Rule two: Gain support of the black community. Rule three: Devote considerable energy to marketing the bonds well beforehand.

On the evening of November 14, however, with the members in full assembly, Mayor Forbis spoke in broader terms. He asked the task force "to propel this community into the next century," to define for Greensboro "what it is and who it wants to be." He invited the members to give "the people of this community an opportunity to say what kinds of things they want to do."

This left questions. Should the focus be narrow or broad, short-term or long-term?

When the task force assembled for its second meeting, the members subdivided into small groups and for more than an hour shared with one another their visions for the future of Greensboro. This exercise served to open communications and led to a statement of "Dreams and Hopes" covering nearly everything from art centers and recreation to transportation.

The mixed messages given the task force might have been considered nothing more than ordinary rhetorical lapses. But the

mere suggestion of a broad mandate, an invitation to dream, only brought into expression a chemistry active in the community and innate to this task force.

If anything, Mayor Forbis, the city council, and the 19 community groups had done their work too well. The Greensboro One Task Force represented conflicting social and economic needs so well, it could not proceed without defining its own mandate. It could not proceed without making itself the public forum that city hall had not provided.

Whereas the Dialogue Task Force grew out of racial discord, the Greensboro One Task Force grew out of more widespread community dissatisfaction. The district voting system adopted in 1982 did not clear a path for immediate, overall harmony and progress. Adjustment to this new system would prove slow. Minorities were assured better representation, but they were still the minority. If anything, the new district system had produced a divided city council.

This division, this inability to give direction, was nowhere better seen than in attempts to revive downtown Greensboro.

For years few causes were greater for city hall than the revitalization of a stagnating inner city. Those holding the reins of power saw a direct link between downtown development and the hunt for new industry. "They [prospects] can tell an awful lot about a community by what pains it has taken to develop downtown," said Mayor Forbis.

But voters were not convinced. In November 1979, for example, a bond referendum for a $7.5 million downtown convention center was rejected by a 2-1 margin that did not follow racial lines. It was the biggest bond referendum defeat in North Carolina that year.

In December 1983 city hall tried again. With the full backing of the city council, Mayor Forbis proposed the city convert an abandoned downtown department store, Thalhimers, into an "arts center." The cost would top $950,000. But when the time came for a vote, in April 1984, resistance surfaced from many quarters, including artists. Another attempt to spark downtown revitalization had failed.

Both the 1979 and the 1984 defeats had a common pattern. The projects were conceived and promoted in haste, without allowing a full expression of public opinion. In both cases decision making preceded consensus building. One councilman decried "back

room politics where a few people decide what's in the best interest of the city." Once again in Greensboro, those governing did not seem to represent the populace at large. "You've got a group of people who feel like they have to control everything that comes down the pike," said one member of the Greensboro One Task Force.

As the Greensboro One Task Force was being assembled, one observer wrote in a letter to the *Greensboro News & Record*:

> The task force should keep in mind the reasons for the recent failures of the convention center and Thalhimers building proposals. Partly those proposals failed because the public correctly perceived that the proposals had not been carefully thought out and planned. Partly they failed because their proponents either distrusted public opinion or simply took it for granted.

And partly they failed because the wounds of 1981-82 had not yet healed; those who spoke for blacks and minorities were still aloof from city hall in spirit. The "heavy hitters" saw a clear link between coliseums, convention centers, and economic growth; blacks, minority groups, and many whites were skeptical.

After the money was spent and the ribbons cut, there was still high unemployment among blacks. The aged and handicapped still lacked adequate public transportation to health and human service agencies. Lower income groups still dwelled in substandard housing. Convention centers, coliseums, museums, and nature centers were seen as projects with limited long-range benefit for those struggling with the most basic needs of living.

Confusion on the task force over its mandate only played into this fundamental difference in aspirations. Given its choice between a received agenda, a "capital improvements plan," and an invitation to think big, the task force wasted little time. "We were given very rigid guidelines," said one woman, an insurance executive. "We just threw them away. We would never have stood still for a request not to listen to what the public had to say."

"The task force very early developed a mind of its own," said Moxley. "The mandate gave them all kinds of permission to go any way they wanted."

On December 14 the task force put aside its given agenda and invited public proposals for the bond referendum. "We want people to think big," said one member of the task force. Mayor Forbis and the city council ran straight to the phones, imploring the

task force to stay with a limited agenda. "We all had sort of a cold chill," said one councilman.

But the task force was off and running. "The charge was to dream," said one member of the task force. "So that's what we did. It was a charge that we all took very seriously."

Within its first few weeks, then, the task force had taken two critical actions to improve its odds for success. Giving leadership to a rotating advisory committee assured that all voices on the task force would be heard. Opening itself to the widest possible public exposure assured that all voices of the community would be heard. By no means could this group be criticized as representing the interests of a narrow few.

The Strains and Stresses

The invitation to the public invited a near avalanche of proposals. Some were carefully printed in pencil or ink, some scrawled in longhand, some tapped out on typewriters. They covered the widest variety of needs and desires: new sidewalks, bicycle trails, a neighborhood swimming pool, fire-fighting equipment, a golf course, a "Future Center," better busing, a low-interest loan program to help people buy single-family homes. More than 100 proposals were submitted.

Added to the delay caused by confusion over mandate was the sheer brunt of paperwork. Mildred "Mid" Dohm, a senior secretary with the Center, categorized the mountain of proposals, creating order where little existed. Over the months she would become important in keeping the task force on track with minutes, letters, reports, and the endless minutiae of procedure. Because of her work the task force at all times knew its status and could move forward without having to start each meeting at ground zero.

"Housekeeping for any committee is a major part of the work," said one member.

As Mid Dohm wrestled with the paper the task force groped for its focus. "We were just a large group with a large charge hearing a lot of information," said one member. "I don't think we really understood the magnitude of the task." Said another: "I was beginning to think after two or three meetings that we weren't going to accomplish anything at all."

None of this inhibited the various subgroups from staking their claims. "A lot of people were partial to their own parts of town," said one member. One group lobbied for the needs of southeast Greensboro, another for the downtown area. Yet another pushed for an arts center.

The largest subgroup consisted of ten members who spoke out for the blacks and minorities. A few were skeptical from the outset. One said he feared "the heavy hitters would control and get what they wanted out of the process."

Even before the Greensboro One Task Force held its first meeting, this group operated strategically. "We found that minorities were not coming forth with any recommendations," said one of its leaders. Indeed, without a broad, public mandate, there would have been no bond proposals that directly affected the black community. "It was our job to go out and get them." Said another member, "We found very quickly we had to establish a secret agenda. The majority was not sensitive to the needs of minorities."

Several whites on the task force, in full sympathy with this minority group, were hearing for the first time things about Greensboro they had never heard. "It's curious the city hasn't put up some of these bread-and-butter issues that citizens have brought to us," said one member, a psychologist. "I find it curious that we're having to get the people in the community to develop our information on these issues."

The goals of the minority group were to protect its own cohesion and to assure its projects were represented without disrupting the task force at large. It sought to avoid the extremes of both militancy as well as complete accommodation and surrender. "One thing we learned in the 60s," said one black member, "you can never make a difference if you're outside the system."

On the surface the rules were in their favor.

The task force had decided that a quorum would consist of two-thirds of the 37 members, or 25. Agreement on an issue would consist of 75 percent of those present, assuming at least a quorum. Absentee ballots were not allowed. As long as they achieved perfect attendance, minority members had the power to stop any objectionable proposal.

But communication was essential.

To make sure they were neither silenced nor inappropriately verbose, the blacks devised a signaling system. If, during a task force meeting, one of its members made a comment that was

interrupted or fell into silence, another member would respond, "to keep it alive." If a black became overly opinionated, speaking out too much, a signal was given to pull him or her into line.

Each time the task force met, the blacks met afterwards, discussing every aspect of the meeting, caucusing as they might at a political convention. They debated which members of the task force were sympathetic, which could be influenced, which were hopeless.

"It was important that we meet so we could just share information," said one member. "We were spread out on all the subcommittees. We had to be of the same mind as much as possible."

"Essentially, what we wanted to do was to make sure we were working together," said another member of the minority group. "We were 10 people out of 37."

Especially in the early weeks, this pull and tug among the various subgroups threatened the neutrality of the facilitators. "We were aware of all the rump groups that were meeting," said Moxley. "We were aware that there were side issues, that there were hidden agenda."

"Politicking," said McAlister.

"And we absolutely ignored them, on purpose, so that we could keep our focus on the original mandate, the original purpose," said Moxley.

"That kept us as a trustable force within the whole thing," said McAlister. "We were never aligned with trying to move something forward in a particular direction. . . . And, boy, there were people working on us. I remember even socially, once or twice, somebody coming up to me and saying, 'Well, when are you going to get those people to do X, Y, or Z?' And I just looked at them and said, 'Well, that's not my job.'"

By mid-January Mid Dohm had collected and categorized the long list of proposals. The task force then divided into five subcommittees to whittle them away, one by one, until it could arrive at consensus on a bond package that would total $40 million—the amount of municipal debt that the task force, through its own study, had determined Greensboro could support. (Two members of each of these committees would meet on that March 1985 evening to argue the final cuts.)

And then the work began, the tedium, the endless meetings and details, reading and studying this proposal and that, the hearings, the arguments. Little did the task force realize that opening

its doors to the public would not only delay its work but also add an element of physical strain. For everyone, including the Center facilitators, the work of the task force was community service in addition to normal job and family responsibilities. As the weeks dragged on, sheer human exhaustion would be added to the other endemic strains.

"I am not a person who is dressed and ready to deal with issues at seven in the morning," said one woman who served on the advisory committee.

"We would come back from spending a lot of time on Greensboro One and maybe sometimes we'd spend a whole day in debrief," said McAlister. "Just hours after we'd spent some time, then we'd spend a couple of hours walking through how it was going.

"I was really pleased there was that much interest on the part of the organization," she added. "But I thought, 'God, we just blew 47 hours. Now we have to do a whole regurgitation of this thing.' That was the struggle for us as facilitators."

Its members became such regular morning customers that Tex & Shirley's set aside a special table for the advisory committee. "I haven't been able to look a pancake in the face since," said Moxley, who attended most of these sessions.

Contributing to the tedium was not only the sheer number of projects but also the importance of several projects so complex they defied easy definition. A proposal to expand seating in the Greensboro Coliseum was burdened by controversy over its management and suspected mishandling of funds. The transportation issue was clouded by the fact that a bus system in Greensboro never showed a profit.

And the housing issue—$7.6 million was requested—was tangled in a web of politics, bureaucracy, and harsh economic reality. Why should taxpayers' money go to slum lords to repair substandard housing? Can tax money legally be spent to purchase new housing? Greensboro has more than 3,500 substandard dwellings; $7 million is only a drop in the bucket. In the long run it would not matter how much was allocated for housing; the main housing problem was that more than 7,300 Greensboro households simply cannot afford housing. Why build housing that cannot be repaired and maintained? And on and on.

"It was hard to define," said Moxley. "And once you think you get it defined, it wiggles out of your arms. And any solution has as

many downsides as upsides. It was craziness. It was a tough, complex, ambiguous problem."

"We've left it up to the federal government because the city and state did not have the courage to face that issue," said one member. "It's a very neglected area. Every other social problem is getting attention except for housing for low income people."

Despite the wish of many to drop the proposal, the blacks and minorities clung to housing on a principle with a long history. During the late 1960s Greensboro did not escape the racial and civil rights conflicts dividing the United States. To this day there are bullet holes in the walls of buildings at North Carolina A&T State University stemming from the violence that followed the killing in 1968 of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In addition to other grievances, blacks charged that city hall favored the more affluent sections of Greensboro in providing municipal services, such as police protection and street maintenance.

To heal these wounds city hall under James Melvin, who became mayor in 1971, redoubled its efforts to provide services on an equal basis. By and large, the early and mid-1970s became a period of accommodation and stability as well as economic expansion. At one point, in fact, the expenditure of capital funds clearly favored the predominantly black southeast precincts.

But it was one thing to repair potholes and pick up the trash and quite another to underwrite social programs, to improve housing, mass transit, and services for the elderly. In fact Greensboro used special legislation to limit its permissible involvement in community action programs. For example, the use of property taxes to fund social programs was forbidden by law.

In essence this conflict about the influence of city government over minority social concerns lay at the heart of the dissensions of Greensboro One. Would the bond proposals benefit one socioeconomic class at the expense of others? For the minority group, housing became symbolic. Their position: Regardless of the money totals, the city has a moral responsibility in public housing. For the Greensboro One Task Force, housing carried the same emotional weight, had the same disruptive potential, as the district system for the Dialogue Task Force in 1982.

By mid-March 1985, then, after four months of work, the task force was beset by enough strains and forces to destroy any group. There was confusion over mandate, massive paperwork, aggressive subgrouping, outside pressures, unwieldy size, complex

issues, human exhaustion, and perhaps most insidious, delay. Patience was beginning to wear thin.

"If a group feels it has unlimited time, unlimited resources, watch out," said one Center observer. "Because you're going to see minor issues blown up into huge issues."

Given strains and conflicts sufficient to destroy the work of any large group, what held this task force together and moving toward compromise?

Walking the Tightrope

Throughout January and February 1985 the advocates of various projects came one-by-one before the task force to present their cases. Because the hearings were open to the public and there were many speakers, the meetings were held in a large hall in the Greensboro Coliseum.

Seeking $5.9 million for an arts center, the United Arts Council invited a large audience to its hearing to show support. The crowd that milled about the hall included young people in costume, including an Indian or two and a few members of the cast of the Nutcracker Ballet—various soldiers, the Nutcracker, of course, and several mice. (In the ballet, there is a fierce confrontation between the Nutcracker and the mice.) All this was part of the presentation.

Bonnie McAlister stood at the rostrum and regarded with foreboding this huge assembly. "They came in and just kind of hung around, in force," she said. "I knew we had to get rid of some of these people. I couldn't figure a way."

Clearly, she was on the spot. How could a hearing be conducted amidst this hubbub? Her experience in crowd control was restricted to smaller groups.

"But I remember saying something like, 'Well, we certainly appreciate all of you being here. You know you're welcome to stay because this is a public meeting. But if you would like to leave, this is the time you can leave. And we certainly do thank all of you people and all of you mice for coming here.'"

The crowd took the hint. Enough Indians, soldiers, and mice wandered away so that a hearing could be conducted without interference from the background buzz of a menagerie.

The incident was typical of the challenges that faced McAlister and Moxley. Hunting and pecking for order and sequence, they had to feel by hunch the time to push for decision, the time for silence and patience, for humor and distraction. Would a coffee break help the process more than debate?

"They had to discern the major movement at any one time and stay in tune with the predominant themes, be the lightning rod," said one member.

Given the lack of historic precedent, this was no mean task.

Moxley recalled, "The message to us after almost every meeting was, 'Let's move this along. Let's get it going. Let's see some action. We're spending too much time on your process issues.'

"And as clearly as we heard that, pulling us in one direction, we would hear somebody else saying, 'You know, we agreed at that first meeting if someone really dissented, we'd give them full time to dissent. And you didn't take time to do that tonight and you need to spend time working with this group over here.'

"So there was that kind of push and pull."

Theirs was a fortunate blend. Both are extroverted people with considerable interpersonal skills and a willingness to take risks. Both have the ability to conceptualize and present ideas clearly, as well as the ability to skillfully organize activities. Despite his innocence of Greensboro politics, Moxley was instantly respected for his management of meetings—keeping the group focused on the business at hand. McAlister added the role of comedienne and garrulous social director. "I was the buffoon and Russ was the newcomer," she said. "He didn't have any history with this group. I could tease these people because I had a history."

Regardless of political, racial, or economic view, each member of the task force credited the work of Moxley and McAlister as significant if not critical to its success. Without this neutral influence, said one member, "it would have taken us twice as long. We might have gotten there. But it would have been another year."

"They made everybody on that task force an equal and contributing member," said another member, a college professor. "I was allowed the time and the floor as much as anyone else. There was nothing condescending in the process."

A news reporter who covered all the meetings said McAlister and Moxley made "the difference between a street fight and a boxing match. They kept low blows from being thrown." Without the

facilitators, said one woman, "we'd have probably punched each other out."

However deft their skills, though, McAlister and Moxley could influence only so many actions, so many decisions. By their neutrality, their refusal to attend side meetings, the facilitators were restricted.

To stay on target for six months the task force itself had to assume much of the responsibility for balance. It had to retain its autonomy, its flexibility, and build mechanisms to correct from within. Had self-government failed, the task force could have collapsed from outside pressures, regardless of the facilitators.

From its first meeting to its last, the task force was the intense focus of general interest. Nothing like this had ever existed in Greensboro. Its predecessor, the Dialogue Task Force, operated away from the glare of publicity and addressed voting and districting, not bonds and public spending.

The Greensboro One Task Force represented new opportunity for many frustrated hopes to be realized: downtown renewal, a new park, a bigger coliseum, renovation of substandard housing. Here was $40 million waiting to be spent. "The mere existence of the task force has been nearly as big a story as its work," said one editorial.

With so much hinging on its work, the potential for exploitation was enormous. For one, the task force might have included puppets controlled by warring community factions. The media could have exploited the sensational, using every argument and conflict as the opportunity for scare headlines. Fearing a loss of clout in their home constituencies, some members might have regarded compromise as weakness. Even worse, city hall could have withdrawn its support, things not going its favored way.

"A group like that inevitably is pressured by a variety of forces," said one observer. "They were picked so they would go talk on a regular basis with some large constituency who would then pressure them. By definition there were a lot of forces operating."

"There were also some larger kinds of political forces operating, which meant several members were being pushed in one direction or the other.

"Fortunately," he added, "none of the outside groups were able to get at the heart of the process, even though for some of those outside forces it became obvious after a few weeks that it was not going in the direction they perhaps hoped."

At the heart of the process was balance, restraint, and the steady push for consensus. From the first night a certain rhythm of self-correction began operating within the chaos to prevent the task force from yielding to extremes.

This was nowhere better expressed than in selection of the group's leadership, the four-member advisory committee that changed every two weeks. From the first night the random draw of names from a hat produced a small group representative of the full task force; male or female, black or white, blue collar or white collar. "Every time," said Moxley, "we got a good cross section."

The advisory committee was able to set priorities and guide debate not only because of the luck of the draw but also because a spirit of restraint permitted the committee to think freely for itself.

If any one mood characterized that evening of its first meeting in November 1984, other than frank skepticism, it was caution. Among those who were veterans of Greensboro politics, savvy in the old conflicts, there was a reluctance to begin a war of words. An unspoken agreement seemed to prevail, to wit: If I play as I do in my own backyard, I may hurt this effort.

"There was a dynamic among all those people that they had been selected to represent an entity in the community," said McAlister. "If they had jumped right in, being vocal, arrogant, obnoxious, or whatever, there would have been 36 other people saying, 'Get rid of this turkey.' And they would not be representing their constituency."

The group of ten who represented blacks and minorities expressed this restraint as well as any other member. Never before had blacks been afforded such an opportunity. Their regular meetings, their signaling system, their strategy was to assure they were pursuing their projects within the rules. A collapse of the Greensboro One Task Force would have been a defeat.

At all times this group of ten spoke for a broad constituency: the poor, the elderly, the handicapped, those on fixed incomes, the long-term unemployed, minorities all. "We did not want to be perceived as having a black agenda," said one member.

"I think we were very aware this was a new and different process," said another black. "People wanted it to work."

The main element that was new and different was the push for consensus and the understanding that no constituency would be neglected. Since a simple majority could not carry an issue, the

usual political tugs, pulls, and tradeoffs would not work. The task force had limited options: Speak in one voice or no voice at all.

"Consensus building took a lot of fire out of the process," said one member.

"At some point this group decided, either consciously or unconsciously, that it was going to take a package, a balanced package to the city council," said Moxley. "And once they decided on that balanced package, the rest was easy. Because people gave up stuff."

"They had a sense of mission," said McAlister. "The sense of mission they all embraced was that once in a point of time a bunch of us got together, trying to do something for the good of not just a constituency but a whole city. We're gonna really try to do something big together rather than play it out on our own.

"Otherwise, a —— would have never given up," she added. "He'd been fighting city hall for so long that finally, the magic hit him. He thought, 'You know what? I'm not gonna get the whole shtick. But I'm gonna make an impact here more than I've ever made before.'

"And —— said to himself, 'Geez, I better come to grips with this thing because these other somebodies are going to give it to me. I'm going to lose my political future if I don't keep my mouth shut.'"

"I remember —— standing up in one of the last meetings," said Moxley. "And he said, 'What I've learned about this process is that when you play with the big boys, you get what you can and then you go back and tell your people I got all I could get and you better accept it.'"

Onward to the Parking Lot

By late February the task force was on its own. McAlister and Moxley were needed less for group processing and building structure than for the routine management of meetings. The norms, the leadership, the push for consensus, the mechanisms of balance were all in place. "We were beginning to trust each other," said one woman.

The 10-member executive committee, two members of each subcommittee, worked steadily to whittle more than $100 million in proposals down to a $40 million bond referendum. The first

$50 million was cut with little difficulty; but the last $10 million hit rough sledding.

As the weeks passed the minority group held as long as it could to two projects: $7.6 million for housing and a proposal that the city take charge of an unprofitable bus system operated by Duke Power Company. While a majority of the task force felt $7.6 million was too much to ask, it was sympathetic to a housing proposal. But few if any outside the minority group were sympathetic to mass transit.

The final painful cuts went one by one: $1 million off the coliseum project; the Natural Science Center lost $2 million; a proposal to restore certain core residential areas was slashed by $1.6 million. By early March the minority group surrendered on mass transit but held fast to the full $7.6 million to restore substandard housing.

Working against a March 21 deadline, this executive committee gathered late one March afternoon to make the final cuts. "We were not supposed to leave that room until we made that change," said one member.

"At that meeting the fangs came out," said one participant. The talk was heated. "When I looked in their faces, all I could see was a stern, defensive determination. It had gotten to a point where there were black things and other things."

The bargaining was tough. If the blacks would not yield on housing, whites threatened to withdraw support for parks and recreational facilities in the predominantly black areas of town. Blacks would have housing money but would have to bear responsibility for the loss of recreational amenities.

The meeting ended in an angry stalemate. "I thought it was through after we got on the elevators," said one member. As the doors closed and the elevators went to the ground floor, "nobody looked at anybody," he added.

"I walked out with a feeling there was no way to work it out," said another member, a middle-aged white man who was a longtime veteran of city government. "There was a strong feeling we could not go any further."

As the others headed for their cars, he asked a young black man, active in community and youth work, to linger a moment. These two had crossed paths on other city matters and now, through their work on this task force, had gained a new respect.

"He was kind of set in his ways and I was kind of set in mine," said the young black. "The respect I have for him is he will tell you exactly where he stands."

The young black had arrived late for the executive committee meeting, coming straight from a Boy Scout troop meeting. He stood in the parking lot in his scouting uniform. "He wasn't going to come at all because he was so hacked off at the whole idea," said one witness. Their talk was brief and they both agreed on a certain reality, that the white business community and the minority group needed one another.

The housing proposal would be on shaky grounds with a majority of the white voters if blacks insisted on the full $7.6 million. A much lower figure might win sympathy. Also, the coliseum expansion project, dear to the business community, was losing support because of financial irregularities. A special audit was under way.

If the minority group would agree to a figure of $2.9 million—enough to repair many old dwellings—the housing proposal could be supported by the conservative business establishment in the northwest districts. In return the black community would support the coliseum expansion, already in trouble with white voters. Besides, the older of the two suggested, if the city allocates too much for housing, it may not qualify for other funding sources.

The young black agreed with this reasoning. He said he felt the group representing minorities might agree to $2.9 million. Besides, an important precedent would be set: For the first time, Greensboro city government would accept a certain responsibility for public housing.

In this manner a project urgently desired by the white community—coliseum expansion—was linked to one desired by the black community—housing.

As they shook hands and parted, the older man felt the day had been saved. Indeed, their compromise spelled the difference. "If they had not backed down," he said, "there would not have been consensus [by the full task force] on very many projects."

"If we had not come to a compromise on housing at that meeting, it would have been the crack in the keel," said one black member.

Within weeks the minority group agreed to the compromise, and on May 1 the task force approved a $39.9 million bond issue consisting of 18 projects.

The minority group did not swallow this compromise without bitterness. "The bottom line was, we blinked," said one black. "It was much better for the minority people to take a lesser portion of the pie. You're getting a little more than if you walk out."

From the beginning, in October 1984, many blacks were cool to the Greensboro One Task Force. They suspected that the agendas were already set, that they were only "pieces in a puzzle all set to go." But they held a trump card. No bond referendum had ever passed in Greensboro without the black vote. Without black representation the task force would go nowhere.

In privacy they asked for only one thing in return for their cooperation: that the city council support the Minority and Women's Business Enterprise Program. This program assures equal rights to businesses owned by minorities and women to bid on city construction, procurement, and professional contracts.

This program and the tacit agreement with city hall never surfaced as an issue throughout the five months of work by the task force. It remained a hidden agreement. But during the summer of 1985, as the bond package was being promoted, support for the Minority and Women's Business Enterprise Program dwindled. A key legislator who was not a Greensboro resident said he would not support the program in the General Assembly.

Suddenly the tacit agreement of October 1984 with the minority group was crumbling. City hall could not deliver. For a brief few weeks in the summer of 1985 some leaders in the black community considered actively opposing the work of the Greensboro One Task Force. But it was too late. Too many wheels were in motion.

"That bond package did not represent the cross section of those 37 people," said one minority group member. "Hence, it did not represent a cross section of the community." The NAACP did not endorse the bond referendum until September, three full months after its recommendation.

The proposal that went to voters in November 1985 included $9,568,500 for expansion of the Greensboro Coliseum and $2.9 million for housing. The coliseum proposal was rejected; everything else was approved.

"I'd give them an A-plus," said one former councilman. "They took a clean slate, looked at everything you could think of, and came out with a balanced package. It is not to be said that was a process that was accomplished without difficulty and emotion."

Epilogue

In its timing, the agreement reached on the parking lot that evening in March 1985 was an echo of the compromise of September 1982 when the Dialogue Task Force agreed on a district voting system.

Both task forces reached their goals through similar rhythms and stages. Each was a heterogeneous group of leaders, some naive, some politically savvy, many quite skeptical. Each went through a period of confusion over goals and mission. For each task force the stakes were enormous—the political and economic viability of Greensboro.

Each task force came together amidst a background of dissension. In the former the dissension was racial; in the latter a general loss of community leadership. Before it could tackle difficult issues each task force slowly built trust through compromise over routine issues and agreement to norms. In these early stages the groups were dependent on neutral facilitators who were needed to establish structure.

As the weeks and months progressed, the members held many side meetings and were submitted to pressures from various outside interests. There were hidden agendas and back-room compromises.

Each task force was motivated to succeed by the presence of grim overarching realities. Standing over the Dialogue Task Force was the U.S. Justice Department ruling that Greensboro could not annex without changing its voting system. Standing over the Greensboro One Task Force was the understanding there would be no winners unless it reached consensus. "They all had a common concern," said one observer. "That was the tie that bound these people together."

By the time they faced their most difficult compromise each task force was operating within its own dynamic of balance, independent of its facilitators. Its accomplishments were its own, not the work of outside agents.

And the work of each task force led to improved communications ("I've known —— for 25 years, but I've never felt this comfortable in calling him up") and a broader understanding of community needs. "I don't think any of us sat through that thing without learning something," said one member with broad experience in city government matters. Said an insurance executive, "It gave me an

understanding for segments of this community that I never would have gained." A black member who emerged bitterly disappointed from the task force conceded: "It was the quintessential learning experience."

For everyone Greensboro One Task Force was a lesson in the arduous processes of democracy. Had the task force not heard all voices before reaching consensus, its credibility would have been undermined. "The thing they learned is that you just don't do things in a vacuum," said one member.

At the Center for Creative Leadership both the Dialogue Task Force and Greensboro One Task Force were valuable experiences in managing conflict among diverse leaders. The norms and standards that have proved effective in many other group settings were found successful in this environment of racial and community conflict.

"I'm confident that we can take even the most fractious group," said one facilitator, "and if we can set some of the rules, and people are willing to live with those rules, that we can get over those crises and not let them totally demolish people."

Perhaps in the long run the greatest impact of these task forces will be the discovery, or rediscovery, of the leadership potential throughout Greensboro. In both task forces various individuals rose to leadership who had been previously uninvolved or, in some manner, isolated.

In general, members of these task forces were not people engaged in the daily grit and detail of politics and government. Their significant reference groups and affiliations transcended the local community in the form of professional and large-scale institutional ties and allegiances. They came from the large banks and corporations, from the schools and colleges and churches; they came from the the broad trade and professional elements; they came from the blue-collar ranks. They were the mediators who occupied positions between the extremes of ancient conflict. Both task forces were able to find the path for compromise because they included in great part this innate leadership resource, this mediating element.

As in similar communities, the leadership that was needed to transcend conflict, to assure progress, could be found if a level playing field of dialogue and consensus was created. The Center for Creative Leadership assisted in preparing that field of play; the leadership talent was present in Greensboro to use that environment to the community's benefit.

In January 1987 Mayor Forbis summoned the Greensboro One Task Force to consider another referendum on two major projects that failed to win support in 1985: a downtown convention center and expansion of the Greensboro Coliseum.

But the result was disappointing. The 1987 task force was highly structured, given little choice on its projects or even its own leadership. "People thought they were being brought together to rubber-stamp something," said one city official. Still bruised from the 1985 compromise, the minority group was far less accommodating. The proposal for a downtown convention center was shelved. A bond referendum on coliseum expansion went to the voters in May 1987 and was again defeated.

The experience led to disillusionment and by mid-1988 the environment for community task forces was not entirely favorable. Critics of city hall claimed that the pendulum of government had swung once again toward elitism. "Dialogue and compromise are power," said one former member of the Dialogue Task Force. "That's what they don't want to be the case and they know it."

But for a brief period during the mid-1980s these task forces were powerful in bringing forth a sea of change in community leadership, in the openness of Greensboro government. "This town has changed tremendously since the 1970s," said one member of Greensboro One. "If you look at the makeup of boards and commissions, you can see it. If you look at what's happening now, there's a tremendous amount of debate." (In March 1987 nearly a third of the 152 appointees on various boards and commissions were black. In 1983 fewer than 20 percent of its appointees were black.)

"Decisions can no longer be made away from [council] chambers," claimed a November 1987 newspaper editorial. "Frank and open debate have rightly become the order of the day."

"We've legitimized our government in the eyes of a lot of people," said a former councilman and member of the Dialogue Task Force. "We now have a coherent political base to start from."

Afterword

Bernie Ghiselin has done a remarkable job of piecing together the story of the Greensboro One Task Force. I would like to add to his account a brief suggestion of what Bonnie McAlister (the other facilitator) and I learned about managing a large, diverse, and unbounded group of leaders struggling for consensus.

Not surprisingly, we learned that to be successful in managing a group like Greensboro One Task Force you need planning. Bonnie and I, with the help of David DeVries, Executive Vice President of the Center, did some things right in the planning process: We established the norms for group interaction that were adopted at the first meeting; we suggested, and the task force adopted, a norm for quorums and decision making that encouraged building a consensus; we encouraged the group to adopt a process for shared leadership so that all constituent groups would be represented during the course of deliberations; and we helped the task force identify and adopt a superordinate goal—developing a balanced bond package that could be taken to the Greensboro City Council and then to the voters.

You also need luck, and we benefited from some notable instances of it. Our plan for shared leadership called for the task force to be directed by an advisory committee, the membership of which would change every third meeting by the drawing of names out of a hat. The night of the first meeting Bonnie and I were nervous, concerned that we would get off to a bad start if only white, establishment males were selected. Fate was with us, however: Out of the hat came the names of two blacks and two whites; one woman and three men. And, call it the luck of the draw, we continued to get a representative advisory committee throughout the life of the task force.

Another piece of good fortune had to do with the unintended consequence of the rules we set for voting. To pass, any vote required approval by 75 percent of those present, assuming a quorum existed. The simple consequence was that even with all 37 members present the 10 minority members had the power to stop any objectionable decision, and this would be the case as long as they kept up their attendance. On the other hand, with a quorum set at 25 the minority members were powerless to take advantage of low attendance and pass measures over the objections of the rest of the task force. We created, without knowing it, a level playing field. We had to learn to work together.

A painful lesson is that managing 37 leaders is messy work. We planned management strategies, but just as often strategies emerged as we went along. There was chaos. Hidden agendas were being followed. Sometimes members got bored and restless; other times they were argumentative. There was fragmentation. Often a breakdown of the process seemed likely. We learned not to try to bring order out of the chaos but to work in the midst of it.

In retrospect I can see that we did not need to fear the chaos. Most of the time the task force worked smoothly, just as the textbooks say groups should function. And with respect to those times that we feared a breakdown, Scott Peck reminds us in *The Different Drum* that chaos is one of the stages in community making, and as such, it is as important as it is threatening. So it was with Greensboro One.

Finally, I should mention three things we learned about our role as facilitators in moving the group forward: the importance of setting boundaries and structures, of remaining neutral, and of having complementary styles.

As much as anything else, in our role as nonvoting co-chairs, Bonnie and I managed the boundaries and structures of the group. This allowed the task force to concentrate on the issues. Then, guided by our intuition and a bit of common sense, we decided early to stay above the fray. We knew there were caucus groups, but we remained disinterested. We knew there were hidden agendas, but we focused on the stated one, opting not to meet with some of the power brokers between meetings. We were neutral. We were trusted.

Throughout, it was very helpful for Bonnie and me to have different but complementary personal styles. I hope she will forgive me if I say we were like Burns and Allen. She, with her delightful sense of humor, kept the group laughing and loose. I, the straight man, kept it on track.

Could the success of Greensboro One be repeated? Of course it could: with planning; with dedicated leaders who are willing to live with some chaos because they believe in what needs to be accomplished; with shared leadership; with an attention to good group process; and with the help of facilitators who have some skill and a rabbit foot that works.

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The Center for Creative Leadership is a nonprofit educational institution founded in 1970 in Greensboro, North Carolina. Our mission is to encourage and develop creative leadership and effective management for the good of society overall.

We accomplish our mission through research, training, and publication—with emphasis on the widespread, innovative application of the behavioral sciences to the challenges facing the leaders of today and tomorrow.

OUR VALUES

Our work should serve society. We expect our work to make a difference in the quality of leadership in the world. To that end, we try to discover what is most important to do, and focus our resources for the greatest, most enduring benefit. In doing this we continually remind ourselves of the inherent worth of all people. We consider it our responsibility to be attentive to the unique needs of leaders who are women or members of minorities. To make a difference in the world and to turn ideas into action, we must be pioneers in our field, contributors of knowledge, creators of solutions, explorers of ideas, and risk-takers in behalf of society.

Our mission and our clients deserve our best. We expect our service to our clients to be worthy, vigorous, resourceful, courteous, and reliable. In the pursuit of our mission, we intend to be a healthy, creative organization with the financial and inner resources needed to produce our best work. We require ourselves to abide by the highest professional standards and to look beyond the letter of professional guidelines to their spirit. This includes being forthright and candid with every client and program participant, scrupulously guarding the confidentiality of sensitive personal and organizational information, and truthfully representing our capabilities to prospective clients.

Our organization should be a good place to work. To demand the best of ourselves, and to attract, stimulate, and keep the best people, we believe we must make an environment that will support innovation, experimentation, and the taking of appropriate risks. As an organization we should prize the creative participation of each member of our staff. We should welcome the open exchange of ideas and foster the practice of careful listening. We have a duty to actively encourage the personal well-being and the professional development of every person who works here. We should, therefore, maximize the authority and responsibility each person has to continue to make an ever greater contribution. Our policies should be implemented sensitively and consistently.

We should do our work with regard for one another. We recognize the interdependence of everyone who works here, and we expect ourselves to treat one another with respect, candor, kindness, and a sense of the importance of teamwork. We should foster a spirit of service within the staff so that we may better serve the world at large.

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